

The Marine Corps Physical Fitness Test: The Need to Replace it
with a Combat Fitness Test
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Your physical fitness levels must be at a point where it is no longer a consideration. You are not fit in order to survive; you are not fit to excel at any physical task; you are fit because it allows you to bring to the battle that critical component of being a Commander and a Leader. You are fit because you must retain the greatest ability to lead, command, to inspire, to think, to plan, and to accomplish your mission. Everything else is for show, and therefore meaningless.

-- D. M. Day

The United States Marine Corps exists to fight and win the nation's battles, and in order to do this Marines must be physically prepared to endure the rigors of combat. As an organization, the Marine Corps takes pride in that purpose, and that single reason is the driving force for nearly everything it does prior to deploying personnel into harm's way. The Marine Corps has directed units deploying to complete pre-deployment training, much of which simulates conditions or tasks that will be experienced or assigned once deployed. The most obvious of these pre-deployment requirements is Mojave Viper in which the scenario-based training nearly replicates many of the tasks a unit will be asked to accomplish, and during which battalions are evaluated on the performance of these tasks. Nevertheless not everything the Marine Corps does in garrison is directed toward preparing it for battle; the current physical fitness test (PFT) falls grossly short of any application to combat. As the current PFT does not adequately evaluate the individual infantryman's level of combat fitness it should be replaced with a combat fitness test.

Background

General Fitness

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 1996 report Physical

Activity and Health defines physical fitness as "the ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue, and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and to meet unforeseen emergencies."¹

Crossfit, a website-based workout program, has popularized the *en vogue*, yet relatively old concept of "functional fitness" throughout numerous military and law enforcement circles and defines fitness using three models. The first model defines fitness through an individual's proficiency in ten general physical skill areas that include cardiovascular/respiratory endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, balance, and accuracy. Similar to the strength of a chain, an individual's fitness level is determined by the individual's proficiency in each area. The second model views fitness as one's ability to perform "any and every task imaginable" well "in relation to other individuals."² Essentially the second model is a performance-based assessment evaluated in competition. The third model assesses fitness in relation to the three metabolic pathways associated with all

¹ U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Washington D.C.: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, The Presidents Council on Physical Fitness and Sports; 1996.

<<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/sgr/sgr.htm>>

² Greg Glassman, "What is Fitness?" *Crossfit Journal*, October 2002, 1-2.

human activities. Specifically, the third model defines the benefits of the long, low power workouts targeted at increasing endurance and burning fat and the short, intense workouts aimed at increasing power, speed, and strength. Additionally, Crossfit explains the crossover between the three pathways the need for balance among them.

Combat Fitness

The Marine Corps considers physical fitness to be "the ability of a Marine to meet the physical demands of any combat or duty situation without undue fatigue."³ This is a broad definition, but the addition of the first two models of fitness suggested by Crossfit to this foundation, produces a reasonable definition of combat fitness. Combat fitness is the ability of the individual Marine to meet the physical demands of assigned tasks, through the application of the ten recognized general skills within the highly competitive realm of combat, without undue fatigue.

Current physical training (PT) requirements and PFT

The current PFT assesses the "collective level of physical fitness Marine Corps wide. It is a measurement of general

³Marine Corps Order P6100.12, Marine Corps Physical Fitness Test and Body Composition Program manual, 10 May 2002.

fitness vice combat readiness and unit/MOS capability.”⁴ MCO P6100.12 further states that the PFT provides “a baseline for potential success in meeting the physical demands of combat.”⁵ Regardless of the PFT’s purpose, as outlined by the order, many commanders look at the PFT as the measuring stick of the unit’s physical ability to perform its assigned tasks. Realistically, the PFT is a measure of an individual’s ability to complete the three prescribed events. Nevertheless it does not adequately measure most of the ten general physical skills nor does it measure functional movements required of a Marine infantryman engaged in combat.

Furthermore, the individual requirements of the Marine Corps’ Physical Conditioning Program require the individual Marine to participate in a minimum of three hours of physical fitness conditioning per week, to test semi-annually with a PFT, and to score at least a 3rd Class.⁶ With limited time for physical training (PT) in the already time-competitive training schedule, a commander must focus his PT effort. These minimal requirements result in a PT program that is better suited for PFT preparation than to functional combat fitness due to two factors. The first is that PFT statistics are tracked and affect a Marine’s promotion. Second, the existing PT programs

⁴ MCO P6100.12

⁵ MCO P6100.12

⁶ MCO P6100.12

and PFT are easily trained to, conducted, and supported. Equipment and area requirements for the current PFT are minimal and easily located on or near any Marine Corps installation, base, or station. Dead-hang pull-ups, crunches, and running are simple exercises to teach and monitor, and since no significant change to the PFT has been implemented since 1972, requirements are well known throughout the Marines Corps.⁷ Unfortunately, this training does not specifically prepare Marines for the rigors of combat, and could ultimately affect more than promotion. As stated in the Marine Corps' Concept for Functional Fitness "if a Marine trains specifically and singularly for the test, his or her physical fitness will likely be unbalanced because the exercises that are part of the PFT do not by themselves develop functional fitness."⁸

Further, Marines are required to conduct the physical fitness test in green-on-green t-shirt and shorts, socks, and running shoes. These conditions in no way replicate what will be expected of a Marine in combat.

Functional Fitness and the Combat Fitness Test (CFT)

⁷ Power Point Presentation: "Marine Corps Combat Fitness" Working Group, 15 November 2007

⁸ "USMC Concept for Functional Fitness," 7 December 2006
<<https://www.mcwl.usmc.mil/concepts/home.cfm>>

In December 2006, MARADMIN 579/06 announced the Marine Corps' "concept for functional fitness." This concept states that "fitness is a conglomeration of physical skills that includes: endurance; stamina; strength; flexibility; power; speed; coordination; agility; balance; and accuracy." It further states "functional fitness is most accurately measured by one's capacity to perform well at the various tasks a Marine is faced with on a daily basis in training or in combat."⁹ This MARADMIN, and the subject concept, have provided a critical "rudder steer" for commanders as they prepare their units for combat. Additionally, the MARADMIN has revealed the need to test the performance of their individual Marines in the realm of functional fitness. The focus of the new PT program and Combat Fitness Test (CFT) would be on functional movements that simulate tasks required of a Marine during combat. Additionally, this test would better assess a unit's collective ability to accomplish the "infinite variety of physical tasks" associated with combat.¹⁰

This new PT program and CFT would have minimal additional equipment requirements, and the majority of these requirements are common and readily available within an infantry battalion or its supporting agencies. Marines would conduct the PT and the

⁹ MARADMIN 579/06, 7 December 2006
<<http://www.usmc.mil/maradmins/maradmin2000.nsf>>

¹⁰ "USMC Concept for Functional Fitness"

test in individual equipment similar to what they would wear during combat operations. At the very least, the test would be conducted in full uniform, boots, body armor, and helmet. Potentially a weighted pack would be used for some or all of the test. Events that could be incorporated in the CFT include, but not limited to, the 800 meter run, shuttle run, pull-ups/fence climb, casualty carry drills, sandbag/ammo can shuttle, thrusters, and sandbag swings.

The Marine Corps is not venturing into unproven territory with its movement to combat-oriented functional fitness. During the summer of 2006, the Canadian Infantry School enjoyed overwhelming success conducting a similar program. The program and test were based on functional movements using equipment ranging from ammunition cans to tires and rocks. This PT program and fitness test more closely resembled tasks and conditions encountered by their soldiers in combat. The Canadian Infantry School reported "substantial increases in all evaluated events, with shorter workouts and no commercial gym equipment" and "increased aerobic gains while performing limited medium distance running and no long distance running."¹¹

Implementation of the program could easily occur over the course of a single year, and the majority of that time would be

¹¹ Power Point Presentation: "The Canadian Infantry School's Austere AOFB Briefing," 1 August 2006

dedicated to getting qualified instructors at all units and teaching the basic functional movements and their components to the Marines. Instruction of the movements and their component parts could be taught during entry-level training in place of the current fitness instruction, and Marines could be qualified as instructors in a manner similar to trainers within the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP).¹² Testing should initially be implemented as outlined in the Commandant's White Letter 05-07, as an augmentation to the existing PFT, but ultimately the Marine Corps should strive to have the CFT replace the PFT entirely to alleviate the already existing shortage of training time.

Counterarguments

Three major potential arguments come to the surface when the subject of a Combat Fitness Test is discussed. The first is that the current PFT is not broken. Marines have been taking the existing PFT for over a quarter of a century, and during this time Marines have performed their duties on and off of the battlefield in an outstanding manner, always accomplishing the mission. These statements are true, but as better methods of training are developed, better methods of testing must be implemented to assess the readiness of individual Marines and

¹² "USMC Concept for Functional Fitness"

units. Similarly, as the Marine Corps has experienced changes in training on the rifle range, it has had to undergo changes in evaluating the new program of instruction.

The second argument is centered on time constraints associated with conducting an additional test and/or a test requiring individual and collective gear. Initially, the commander's time will be strained, but conducting a more efficient and focused program will ultimately contribute to success in combat and will prevent the commander from wasting valuable training and testing time on a program and test that have almost zero applicability to combat-related tasks.

Lastly, opponents of the program and CFT will argue that the equipment requirements will prevent all Marines from conducting the test annually. Equipment requirements are minimal and common to most Marine units. Units that do not possess the equipment could easily acquire the equipment from higher headquarters or from the Defense Reutilization Management Office (DRMO).

Conclusion

The multitude of tasks asked of the Marine infantryman deployed in combat requires him to be in peak physical condition. The commander's responsibility is to assess his unit's level of fitness prior to deploying, but given a time-

constrained environment, often commanders allow the current PT program and PFT to determine how his Marines are trained in the realm of physical fitness. Because of this, changing the PFT to a CFT focused on functional fitness and conducted in individual combat equipment, the commander can better prepare his Marines for combat and still satisfy Marine Corps requirements. If the Marine Corps' singular focus is fighting and winning the nation's battles, its physical fitness test should assess its Marines to this end. The implementation of the CFT would help to achieve this ultimate goal.

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